

# Social Worker Empowerment Hotline Report 2018 Report to the Legislature



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**Social Worker Empowerment Hotline (AB 1978)**  
**Report to the Legislature**  
**Legislative Mandate**

The Social Worker Empowerment Hotline was created by [Assembly Bill 1978](#) (Chapter 768, Statutes of 2014) and was implemented on January 1, 2016.

Assembly Bill 1978 added Section 10605.5 to the Welfare and Institutions Code, requiring the California Department of Social Services to report to the Legislature and publically post, no later than January 1, 2018, the following information:

- 1) The total number of relevant disclosures received from social workers, including the month and year the disclosure was received.
- 2) A summary description of both of the following:
  - (a) The issues raised in the disclosures received from a social worker.
  - (b) The actions taken by the department in response to the disclosures.

Additional copies of this report can be obtained from:

California Department of Social Services  
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This report also may be obtained on the California Department of Social Services website: <http://www.cdss.ca.gov/inforesources/Information-Resources/Program-and-Legislative-Reports/Children-and-Family-Services-Reports>

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## Executive Summary

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Assembly Bill (AB) 1978 (Chapter 768, Statutes of 2014) gave the California Department of Social Services (CDSS) the responsibility to work with counties and labor organizations to establish a process by which the Department may receive voluntary disclosures from county child welfare social workers if a social worker has reasonable cause to believe that a policy, procedure, or practice related to the provision of child welfare services by a county child welfare agency, as defined, endangers the health or well-being of a child or children, as specified.

The bill prohibits the Department from disclosing to any person or entity the identity of a social worker making a disclosure pursuant to these provisions, unless the social worker has consented to the disclosure or there is an immediate risk to the health and safety of a child. The bill requires the Department, no later than January 1, 2018, to report to the Legislature, and post on its internet website: (1) the total number of relevant disclosures received, and (2) a summary description of the issues raised in those disclosures and of the actions taken by the Department in response to those disclosures.

## Background

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The 58 county child welfare agencies in California have policies or procedures rooted in state law or regulation that guide social workers in the delivery of services to children and families. Fundamental to these policies is the assurance of a child's safety and well-being. Some of the key activities associated with these include social workers conducting safety and risk assessments, in person visits with the child, and placement and supervision of a child into foster care and permanency planning.

It is sometimes not until after a sentinel event occurs, most often a child's death or high profile media case, that the Department is made aware of a poor practice or bad policy. The policy or practice could have been in place for many months if not years causing harm or additional trauma. To address a number of issues, CDSS would conduct a retrospective review of past practices to determine whether this event was isolated or reflective of a broader issue within the county. These reviews can include interviews with the case carrying social workers, their supervisors, and upper management within the counties. Due to a lack of confidentiality in making these reports as well as fear of reprisal, social workers have been reluctant to share critical information with CDSS as part of its oversight authority.

AB 1978 was sponsored by the Services Employees International Union and the Children's Advocacy, Inc. The intent of AB 1978 was to create a process for CDSS to receive practice concerns directly from county staff. This allows for better oversight by the State as well as offers transparency by reporting the outcomes of each call that is received. It also helps ensure that practice is consistent with the Administration's and the Department's existing policies to provide for the health, safety, and well-being of children. To provide the enhanced oversight for the child welfare system, CDSS worked with stakeholders from labor unions and the County Welfare Directors Association (CWDA) to create a process whereby social worker

disclosures are received, evaluated against established criteria, investigated, and reviewed annually to help with system improvement.

The implementation of the Social Worker Empowerment Hotline (SW Hotline) began with the hiring of a dedicated Staff Services Manager I (Specialist) in August of 2015. This position is dedicated to the development and implementation of the SW Hotline, as well as taking calls and conducting investigations of allegations received by the Department. The implementation of the SW Hotline has been made possible through the collaboration of efforts among CDSS, CWDA, and labor unions who were involved in the development and sponsorship of the bill. Collaboratively, these entities worked together to develop a framework for the operation of the hotline, a process for providing feedback to counties about the issues identified through this process, as well as a process for more formal intervention in the form of on-site reviews that is in line with the provisions of Welfare and Institutions Code 10605 and the Department's authority to conduct oversight activities and audits.

#### *SW Hotline Infrastructure Development*

During the first year after the initial implementation of the SW Hotline, CDSS worked with stakeholders and counties to refine the consultation process, providing technical assistance, and engaging with the county and reporting social workers to address the concerns that have been identified. Internal policies and procedures have been refined, and data analysis and reporting procedures are in place. In addition, to increase transparency and offer an opportunity to receive feedback, CDSS has shared information through the CWDA Operations Committee regarding complaints received via the SW Hotline. This has improved coordination with CDSS in working together with counties to address any identified concerns.

#### *SW Hotline and On-site Review Process Guide Development*

CDSS and a sub-committee from CWDA Operations was formed to help in the development of formal process guides to be used by the department and counties to understand the steps involved in both the formal and informal interventions/engagement. This was done in response to concerns raised by counties about understanding the process for engagement when an investigation is initiated by the SW Hotline or when the concern identified by the department requires an on-site review. These process guides were introduced to CWDA in May 2017 and are in alignment with the provisions of WIC 10605. They are included for reference in Appendix A, Process Guides.

#### *Implementation of Virtual Contact Center*

After the initial implementation of the SW Hotline on January 2, 2016, it was determined that there was a need to develop additional infrastructure for handling call volume and tracking call data. In response, the SW Hotline and the Office of the Foster Care Ombudsperson in partnership began to pursue the implementation of the shared technology of a Virtual Contact Center platform. The Virtual Contact Center allows for call analytics, better call management, and cross coverage of the telephone system. This was approved in early 2017 and implemented in July 2017. It is anticipated that this will improve the efficiency of staff time and assist in automated tracking of analytics for future reporting purposes.

#### *Development of Case Management and Data System*

In addition to call analytics, there is a need to have a case management system in place to help manage the information around each call, how it is handled, and all data involved in calls

resulting in investigation. The SW Hotline staff, in coordination with the Office of the Foster Care Ombudsperson, worked with the Information Systems Division within CDSS to develop a product that would meet this need. After determining that an outside vendor would be preferable to meet business needs, a scope of work was developed and a collective project was proposed and approved. The development and implementation of the project will occur in the 2017/18 Fiscal Year and will provide quality data for future reporting periods.

## Data Summary of Calls Received

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### TABLE 1

The SW Hotline received a total of 289 calls from January 1, 2016, to December 31, 2016. Of those calls, 270 of the calls were complaints or requests for information that fall outside of the scope of the intended purpose of AB 1978. Information and referrals were provided to all callers that did not fall within the scope of the SW Hotline, and the summary information has been offered to each county's Child Welfare Director in order to help counties identify any other systemic issues that they can address through outreach, dissemination of information, or other methods. Table 1 describes the total number of calls received in 2016, both those that met the statutory requirements of the bill and those that include other information and referral calls to various social services programs.

### TABLE 2

For the calls that did not meet SW Hotline criteria, the Department has categorized the type of complaint or associated program area related to the call and the county involved in Table 2. It should be noted that some calls had more than one issue identified, resulting in 306 identified issues from 270 calls. Counties that did not have calls within their jurisdiction were not included in the table. Though the majority of the calls received through the SW Hotline were information and referral calls, they were primarily received in more population dense jurisdictions. In addition to the county calls, there were 73 calls where the caller did not identify the county of jurisdiction, but was still offered information and referral to local resources. In addition, there were 11 calls that were from other states and callers were directed back to their local state resources.

### TABLE 3

The SW Hotline received a total of 19 calls that met the criteria listed in statute. The call summary and outcomes are listed in Table 3.

Table 1: Total Call Summary			
County/Jurisdiction	Information and Referral Calls	SW Hotline Calls	Total Calls
Alameda	13	0	13
Amador	0	1	1
Butte	1	2	3
Contra Costa	6	1	7
El Dorado	2	0	2
Fresno	3	0	3
Humboldt	0	1	1
Kern	2	2	4
Kings	2	0	2
Lake	2	0	2
Los Angeles	73	3	76
Marin	1	0	1
Mendocino	0	1	1
Merced	1	0	1
Monterey	2	2	4
Nevada	1	0	1
Orange	11	0	11
Plumas	0	1	1
Riverside	10	0	10
Sacramento	6	1	7
San Bernardino	18	0	18
San Diego	10	1	11
San Francisco	1	0	1
San Joaquin	2	1	3
San Mateo	2	0	2
Santa Clara	3	0	3
Santa Cruz	2	0	2
Shasta	1	0	1
Solano	4	0	4
Sonoma	2	0	2
Tuolumne	1	0	1
Tulare	2	0	2
Ventura	3	0	3
Yolo	1	1	2
Unknown	71	1	72
Other States	11	0	11
<b>Total</b>	<b>270</b>	<b>19</b>	<b>289</b>

Table 2: Summary of Calls Outside of SW Hotline Jurisdiction

County/ Jurisdiction	Section 8/Housing	Medi-Cal	EBT/Food Stamps	CalWorks/Eligibility	General Relief	Family Law	Child Abuse/Neglect	Elder Abuse/APS	Public Health/Skilled Nursing Facility	IHSS	Social Worker/Agency Issue/Complaint	Out of State Issue/ ICPC	Social Security	FCO	Medical Issue	Adoptions	CCL	Probation	Community Resources	Child Support	Law Enforcement	Education	Union/Personnel	Insufficient Information	Total Issues Identified by Jurisdiction
Alameda	-	-	1	-	-	1	5	-	-	1	3	-	1	-	-	-	1	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	13
Butte	-	-	-	-	-	-	1	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	1
Contra Costa	-	-	-	-	-	-	4	2	-	-	2	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	6
El Dorado	-	-	-	2	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	2
Fresno	-	-	-	-	-	1	1	-	-	-	1	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	3
Kern	-	-	-	-	-	1	2	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	3
Kings	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	2	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	2
Lake	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	1	-	-	1	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	2
Los Angeles	1	-	2	3	2	10	19	19	2	9	6	1	1	-	1	1	-	-	1	1	-	-	-	-	79
Marin	-	-	-	-	-	-	1	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	1
Merced	-	-	-	-	-	1	1	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	1	3
Monterey	-	-	-	-	-	-	2	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	2
Nevada	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	1	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	1
Orange	-	-	-	-	-	-	4	1	-	1	3	1	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	1	-	-	11
Riverside	-	-	-	-	-	2	4	1	-	-	3	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	10
Sacramento	-	-	-	-	-	-	3	-	-	-	3	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	6
San Bernardino	-	-	1	1	-	-	12	-	-	-	4	-	1	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	19
San Diego	-	1	-	-	-	1	3	1	-	1	4	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	11
San Francisco	-	-	-	-	1	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	1
San Joaquin	-	-	-	-	-	-	1	-	-	-	1	-	-	1	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	3
San Mateo	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	1	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	1
Santa Clara	-	-	-	-	-	2	1	1	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	1	-	5
Santa Cruz	-	-	-	-	-	1	1	-	-	-	-	-	-	1	-	-	1	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	4
Shasta	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	1	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	1
Solano	1	1	-	-	-	-	1	1	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	4



Sonoma	-	-	-	-	-	1	1	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	2
Tuolumne	-	-	-	-	-	-	1	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	1
Tulare	-	-	-	-	-	-	2	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	2
Ventura	-	-	-	-	-	-	1	-	-	-	1	-	-	-	1	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	3
Yolo	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	1	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	1
Unknown	-	3	2	3	-	7	28	2	1	-	6	-	-	2	1	-	2	1	-	-	4	2	-	26	64
Other States	1	-	-	-	-	-	3	1	-	-	-	4	1	-	-	-	-	-	-	1	-	-	-	-	11
<b>Total Issues by Category</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>9</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>28</b>	<b>102</b>	<b>29</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>12</b>	<b>44</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>27</b>	<b>278</b>

Table 2 continued

Table 3: SW Hotline Call and Outcome Summary			
Date	Issue Reported	Status	Resolution
Jan.	Bordering counties refusing to accept cross reports involving split families across county lines.	Closed	County contact made to assess practice and identified regional workgroup that developed document to address issue.
Feb.	Delayed Quality Assurance process causing reopening of referrals and late investigations.	Closed	County contact made to assess practice and determined that there was not a systemic issue, but further training was to be provided for staff to better understand process.
	Pressure to approve “unsafe” Supervised Independent Living Placement placements, lack of policy guidance.	Closed	County reviewed specific case and provided oversight and additional training to clarify requirements to staff, not a systemic issue.
Mar.	Delayed response to incoming hotline calls, backlog of hotline entry into Child Welfare Services/Case Management System.	Closed	Reviewed issue with county, to be addressed in corrective action plan.
	Delayed intake review and assignment by supervisors.	Closed	Reviewed issue with county, to be addressed in corrective action plan.
	Confidential placement information released in medical provider data breach.	Closed	County continuing to work with medical provider to correct systemic issue.
	County has not addressed ongoing issue with social worker who fails to enter or respond to referrals.	Closed	County contact made to assess child safety concerns, unable to confirm supporting info.
Apr.	County had given blanket policy to bypass all parents that are eligible to do so, regardless of the circumstances, in response to public pressure from a media case.	Closed	County repealed policy and developed clear guidelines and process for screening bypass cases.
	Staff were instructed by management that all youth prescribed psychotropic meds were to have them administered immediately by care provider, even if JV-220 <sup>1</sup> was not yet court approved. (Under authority of extenuating circumstances.)	Closed	County was contacted and determined this was a misunderstanding in instruction. They held trainings to clarify their policies with all staff.
	Reports of practice issues related to conflict of interest, inconsistent policies, training, and transfer of	Elevated to on-site review	Found merit to allegations and CDSS conducted site visit in August 2016, released findings report in December 2016.

<sup>1</sup> JV-220 is a standard document required in juvenile court matters where a youth in case is prescribed psychotropic medications. See the website for the judicial council for reference at <http://www.courts.ca.gov/forms.htm?filter=JV>.

Table 3: SW Hotline Call and Outcome Summary			
Date	Issue Reported	Status	Resolution
	learning; alleged foster youth rights violation not being addressed by agency.		
	Possible child safety related call from SW to determine if county actions are consistent with state policy or if there is other policy interpretation.	Closed	Actions reported were consistent with state law, child safety was verified and no further action needed.
May	Reports of safety related concerns for front end practice, changing of documentation, lack of appropriate documentation, assessment skill/training issues, lack of skilled worker staffing in emergency response, and failure to report near fatality to CDSS.	Elevated to on-site review	Found merit to allegations and CDSS conducted site visit in June 2016, released finding report in November 2016. Corrective Action Plan set in place December 2016.
Jul.	Caller wanted to report agency misconduct, but failed to provide enough information to identify or investigate concerns.	Closed	Lack of information.
Aug.	Report that agency practices institutional bias by paying staff to attend Native American cultural activities, but no other cultural activities are offered for staff to attend during working hours.	Closed	Outside of the scope of CDSS, referred worker back to her county Equal Employment Office to report concern for county to handle at a local administration level.
	Report that county is now housing children in offices since their assessment center was cited; staff feel the location is unsafe and there is insufficient security and staff to care for children.	Closed	CDSS reviewed the county practices for safety and this complaint was turned over to the Office of the Foster Care Ombudsperson and Community Care Licensing who are investigating these concerns.
	Reports that social workers are being called first responders and not being provided benefits and that their caseloads are expanding, but they are not allowed to work overtime to catch up.	Closed	Requested additional details to help with investigation, but no response received and closed for lack of info.
Sept.	Staff member reported they had observed unfair treatment of a client by their supervisor and was then reassigned to the emergency response unit as retaliation.	Closed	Additional details requested about incident, but not received. Potentially outside of SW Hotline scope, insufficient information to determine.
Oct.	Report on an administrative delay that prevents cases from being	Closed	Requested the reporting party to submit copies of the documentation, but no

Table 3: SW Hotline Call and Outcome Summary			
Date	Issue Reported	Status	Resolution
	transferred from one unit to another within the same office. Staff fear that this causes unnecessary delays to high risk families. Claims that the policy is unwritten but being enforced by management and is contrary to current written policy.		additional information received after over 90 days. Closed for lack of information.
Dec.	Case-specific report of social worker not being adequately trained or provided supervision and resulted in family reunification case not achieving timely permanency.	Closed	Lack of information provided and could not find evidence to support concern.

### *Policy/Regulatory Issues*

There were six calls that primarily centered on a concern about a county policy that either had a negative impact on child welfare practice or was in conflict with state regulations or policies. All of these issues were resolved in the following manner using informal communication with the counties: (1) a regional workgroup was formed and drafted an agreement on how to handle intercounty investigations, (2) quality assurance data was reviewed and found that there was an isolated incident of quality assurance causing case delay in two cases and no intervention was needed, (3) two cases that had a policy that was called into question were reviewed and CDSS found that the policies were in alignment with state regulation<sup>2</sup>, (4) county repealed its own policy and drafted new policies regarding bypass of family reunification services, and (5) closed for lack of information.

### *Practice Issues*

There were four calls that primarily centered on county practices that either had negatively impacted child welfare services or outcomes. These issues were resolved with informal consultation with the counties in the following manner: (1) two calls focused on delays with intake and assignment were reviewed with the county and addressed in their open Corrective Action Plan, (2) concerns about unfair treatment of clients by supervisor were investigated and there was a lack of information to support this concern and was closed, and (3) a concern about delays in case transfer that might lead to necessary services not being provided timely was made but no documentation or other supporting information could be found to support this concern and was closed.

### *Safety Issues*

There were three calls that primarily centered on safety related issues for youth in the child welfare system: (1) release of confidential child placement information occurred due to a data

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<sup>2</sup> The counties provided clarification and training to staff to ensure that they were acting in accordance with policy

system issue and a county workgroup was formed to identify a process to ensure identification of foster youth and prevention of future data breaches, (2) a call regarding a possible child safety issue was reviewed and determined that there was no safety issue, and (3) a call regarding children being housed in child welfare offices was referred to Community Care Licensing and the Office of the Foster Care Ombudsperson.

### *Other Issues*

There were four calls that primarily centered on other issues for related to the child welfare system: (1) one call was focused on the performance of a social worker that falls outside of the oversight of CDSS as it is a personnel matter and was referred back to the county, (2) a call regarding possible agency misconduct was made without any supporting information and was closed, (3) a call about an agency being biased by offering staff opportunities to attend Native American events on the clock but no other cultural events was referred back to the county as this allegation is not within the jurisdiction of CDSS, and (4) a call regarding staff being made first responders outside of the scope of their job duties was referred back to the county as a labor issue and outside of the oversight of CDSS.

### *Issues Resulting in On-site Review*

There were two calls that had multiple issues and once reviewed, resulted in a more formal intervention including on-site review, findings and recommendation reports, and an official response by the county. The first call focused on reports of practice issues including conflict of interest, inconsistent policies, lack of training and transfer of learning, and a foster youth rights violation that was not addressed by the county. An on-site review was held and resulted in a findings report that determined the county needed to develop policies and procedures to address the identified concerns. The second call focused on safety related practices in intake and assessment, inappropriate changes made to documentation, lack of appropriate documentation, poor assessment skills, training issues, not meeting Division 31 regulations staffing requirements, and failure to report a possible near fatality. An on-site review was held and a full assessment of front end practice was conducted, resulting in a formal findings and recommendations report and subsequent Corrective Action Plan. The plan is being supervised by CDSS until completion.

## **Next Steps**

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### *Infrastructure Development*

California is the first state to implement a hotline of this kind. As such, determining how to appropriately engage counties under the structure of a state supervised, county administered child welfare system required regular communication with county and labor representatives, as well as ongoing internal assessments. After the first year of operations, one additional limited-term staff person was added to provide support during ongoing development activities and to provide support to handle the call volume. Future staffing needs will be assessed based upon call volume, infrastructure needs, and funding availability.

### *Outreach & Education*

AB 1978 was sponsored by the county social workers' labor union to create a process for social workers to be able to make reports of practice, policy, and safety related issues within child welfare services in the county without fear of retaliation. Prior to the initial implementation of the SW Hotline, CDSS released All County Letter 15-03, outlining information about the hotline and providing an informational poster. However, the first year of data and feedback from child welfare agencies indicates that many social workers are still unaware of the resource and that additional efforts to inform staff of the SW Hotline are needed. CDSS has developed several outreach strategies to improve the effectiveness of the SW Hotline, including strengthening its engagement with the union and county labor representatives to better share information with its members.

## Appendix A

### Process Guides

As referenced in the report above, two process guides were developed between the CDSS and CWDA stakeholders. The SW Hotline Process Guide outlines the process for receiving, triaging, investigating, and resolving issues received through the SW Hotline; while the On-Site Review Process Guide outlines the process for CDSS to receive, triage, investigate, and respond to issues raised involving the provision of child welfare services within California.

#### Social Worker Empowerment Hotline Process Guide





